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INTRODUCTION

## The Psychic Life of Paperwork

The management of the modern office is based upon written documents (the “files”), which are preserved in their original or draft form, and upon a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts.

—Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (1922)

Bentham’s Panopticon, Weber’s Iron Cage, Kafka’s Castle—since the beginning of the modern era, these buildings have darkened our skyline. Even as the crowds were tearing down the Bastille, that monument to tyranny, officials were busy erecting still more formidable institutions from which to tax and spend, protect and serve, discipline and punish. Shut your eyes for a moment and summon up images of the interiors: the waiting rooms, hallways, doorways, and offices where clerks sit writing, copying, calculating, or staring off into space. Memos, forms, files, registers spilling out of desks, drawers, shelves, cabinets.

This book is about paperwork and its contradictions. It begins with the observation that notwithstanding its reputation for tedium, paperwork is full of surprises. The ballot that is supposed to serve as the foundation of representative government is spoiled by a dimpled chad. The tax form that is supposed to ensure that we all share the costs of government turns out to be incomprehensible to all but a few. The warrant that is supposed to protect against arbitrary search and seizure is mistakenly written for the wrong address. The visa that is supposed to help us work or travel keeps us returning to the same place over and over

again, hoping, this time, that we remembered to bring the right supporting documents. And these are only the most visible kinds of records—the “charismatic megafauna” of paperwork. Behind each of these are hundreds or thousands or hundreds of thousands more opportunities to misspell a word, miscalculate a number, misread a blank, misunderstand an instruction, misaddress an envelope. Paperwork syncopates the state’s rhythms, destabilizes its structures. Under ordinary conditions, the mishaps are corrected, rhythms restored, structures restabilized. But under extraordinary conditions—war, revolution, natural disaster—even the most minor technical error can have catastrophic results.

I take “paperwork” to mean all those documents produced in response to a demand—real or imagined—by the state. This includes everything from sums recorded by lowly clerks, to petitions submitted by indignant citizens, to founding declarations maintained by official archivists in climate-controlled repositories. In its tersest form, my argument is that paperwork is unpredictable and that this unpredictability is frustrating: it frustrates those of us who write memos or fill out forms as part of our jobs; it frustrates those of us who need a stamp or signature to get on with our lives; and, above all, it frustrates the intellect, including the intellects of the intellectuals.

Indeed, as I will argue in this book, modern political thought was both founded and confounded by its encounters with paperwork. Instead of a critical theory of the “bureaucratic medium,” a term Marx used once in passing, we have a myth, or a collection of myths, about bureaucracy and bureaucrats. There is a strange consistency to these myths, that is to say, it is strange how consistent they are, and the consistency itself is strange—easy to grasp, but hard to get a grip on. The anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, drawing on fieldwork in Greece, refers to the stories we tell each other about bureaucracy as “secular theodicies,” that is to say, efforts to explain, and sometimes to explain away, the existence

of incompetence, indifference, or corruption of political institutions.<sup>1</sup> We tend to condemn bureaucracy and bureaucrats when better explanations elude us. There is an old saying that a myth is the imaginative or imaginary resolution of real contradictions; the myths of bureaucracy seek not only to resolve paperwork's contradictions, but also the contradictions in our own thought. We have been unable to reconcile our theories of the state's power with our experience of its failure.

This project was originally inspired by my rather literal-minded reading of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. For Derrida, philosophy has always preferred speech to writing, which it regards with suspicion as a "fallen, secondary, instituted" form of communication.<sup>2</sup> What is true of philosophy in general, I reasoned, must also be true of political philosophy or political theory in particular, which has always preferred the voice of power over its written traces, the great discourses of kings and legislators over the obscure scrivenings of functionaries and clerks.

I initially thought that the history of the idea of "bureaucracy" (*la bureaucratie, die Bürokratie*) would make for a nice case study. There is no trace of the idea in Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Rousseau, Burke, or even Hegel. Yet by the 1850s it was all the rage. Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Mill's *On Liberty*—each took a turn denouncing bureaucracy and its agents in remarkably similar terms. What accounted for the idea's success? I attempted to answer this question in a mode of intellectual history modeled a bit on Michel Foucault, a bit on François Furet, and a bit on Quentin Skinner. Following their examples, I traced the history of the idea from its Enlightenment origins into revolutionary journalism, postrevolutionary popular culture, and nineteenth-century political theory.

As time passed, however, I found myself less interested in the history of discourses about paperwork and more interested in the

stuff itself. Turning to the field of book history, I started studying paperwork's tools and techniques. The printing revolution that transformed early modern Europe's churches, universities, laboratories, and cafés largely bypassed its government offices. In the French Revolution, where this book opens, clerks were still producing and reproducing documents in much the same way as medieval monks, using feathers plucked from geese to apply inks derived from gall nuts to surfaces made from soiled rags or animal skins. The manual labor required to transform these raw materials into files, registers, and finally power itself was slow, hard, and prone to error. Split quills ruined important reports, spilt ink delayed urgent communiqués. The development of wood-based paper, synthetic inks, and metal nibs in the nineteenth century may well have reduced the incidence of such mishaps, but could never eliminate them entirely. Nibs still break. Ink still smudges. Handwriting still cramps. Signifiers still slip. And then, even if a piece of paper carries legible, meaningful writing, even if that writing conveys accurate information intelligible to sender and addressee, the message itself can easily be lost or delayed, or it can arrive at the right place at the right time only to be mishandled or misunderstood. Most mistakes are not the result of bad faith or even sloppiness. They are simple, but ineluctable failures to communicate—a literal-minded version of Derridean *différance*.

This book, thus conceived, would have had a little bit of everything that I liked most in historiography: the sophistication of deconstruction, the erudition of intellectual history, the rigors of book history. Or the rigors of deconstruction, the sophistication of intellectual history, the erudition of book history. The erudition of deconstruction, the rigors of intellectual history, the sophistication of book history. My plan was to pick and choose methods as appropriate and then tie them neatly together with a few good microhistories and the occasional dialectical *deus ex machina*. Whenever anybody asked me about my methods, I told them I was “eclectic.”

Then, in 2005, Joan W. Scott published an article entitled, simply, “Against Eclecticism.” She pointed to an “increasingly

evident tendency among scholars who know they have been influenced by poststructuralist theory to minimize that critical influence, to describe it as simply one among many ‘methodologies’ that has been used to advance empirical projects that are now taken to be the primary object of research and writing.” Drawing a parallel to Victor Cousin’s “philosophical eclecticism,” she argued that such a strategy evades its critical responsibility. “Eclecticism,” she wrote, “connotes the coexistence of conflicting doctrines as if there were no conflict, as if one position were not an explicit critique of another. The aim is to ignore or overlook differences, to create balance and harmony, to close down the opening to unknown futures that (what came to be called) ‘theory’ offered some twenty or thirty years ago.” Scott’s point, it should be stressed, is not that we should embrace some theoretical, even critical-theoretical orthodoxy; she readily acknowledges that her own work has drawn on a number of theoretical sources that are at odds with one another. Rather, she objected to easy, feel-good solutions to our theoretical difficulties. So much for my hermeneutic circle around the campfire.

The book was rekindled by two texts that I discovered only after I had taken up a position as the in-house historian in a media studies department: Cornelia Vismann’s *Files: Law and Media Technology* and Bruno Latour’s *The Making of Law: An Ethnography of the Conseil d’État*. Vismann, a lawyer and scholar trained in the DDR, relied on the syncretic, idiosyncratic media theory of Friedrich Kittler to offer a diachronic account of the relationship between law and technologies of writing from ancient Rome to the present. Latour, well known for his contributions to science studies, presented a synchronic account of how paperwork circulated within France’s highest legal institution. “Every case, at least in our country of written law, has for its corporeal envelope a cardboard cover held together by rubber bands,” Latour writes. The task is to “set aside vague propositions on rights, laws,

and norms in exchange for a meticulous investigation into dossiers—grey, beige, or yellow; fat or thin; simple or complicated; old or new—to see where they lead us.”<sup>4</sup>

I have written about these and other studies of paperwork at greater length elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Here let me just say that both Vismann’s media archaeology and Latour’s media ethnography provide elegant, intelligent, and witty—that is to say, extremely seductive—examples of what used to be called “theoretical anti-humanism.” But something about Latour’s work, in particular, left me unpersuaded. Or rather, it persuaded me that no matter how closely I examined paperwork itself, no matter how much I learned about its materiality, I was never going to come around to the argument that things have agency like people do. This is not because I am especially sentimental about the humanity of humans, though it can be one of their nicer features. Nor do I have much patience for the idea that scholars have an obligation to “grant agency” to their subjects, an imperative that, however well-intentioned, involves a fairly serious category mistake. Rather, for reasons personal and professional, I am committed to the idea that people are ruled by unconscious processes, which is simply not true of even the most “agentic” things. Barbara Johnson has said something smart about this difference and its implications for scholarship. “The more I thought about the asymptotic relation between things and persons,” she reflects in the prologue to her book *People and Things*, “the more I realized that the problem is not, as it seems, a desire to treat things as persons, but a difficulty in being sure we treat persons as persons.”<sup>6</sup>

Our experience of paperwork’s contradictions is an experience of carelessness, sometimes our own, sometimes somebody else’s. Again and again, this carelessness is conflated with uncaring. “The state is the coldest of all cold monsters,” writes Nietzsche.<sup>7</sup> “The rule by Nobody, which is what the political form known as bureaucracy is,” adds Arendt.<sup>8</sup> This book sets out to demystify



this experience and the comic-paranoid style of political thought to which it has given rise. What do we want from our paperwork? What depends on it? Who depends on it? How do we ensure its success? How do we prepare for its failure? How do we respond when these failures occur? What sorts of solidarity do we show, what sorts of resistance do we enact, what sorts of reforms do we demand? What sorts of explanations do we offer, what sorts of anecdotes do we share, what sorts of ridicule do we heap on that man or woman on the other side of the desk or telephone?

In the end, I have come to define my object of study as the psychic life of paperwork. The phrase owes something to Judith Butler (“the psychic life of power”) and something else to Lydia Liu (“the psychic life of media”).<sup>9</sup> Most of all, it owes something to my theoretical and clinical work in psychoanalysis. I would like to add a brief word about this.

One of Freud’s contemporaries, the Oxford anthropologist R. R. Marret, described the psychoanalyst’s excursions into history and anthropology as a collection of “just-so stories.” It was not intended as a compliment, but Freud rather liked it.<sup>10</sup> He may not have always known what he was doing, but he usually knew when he didn’t. “Our psychological analysis does not suffice even with those who are near us in space and time unless we can make them the object of years of the closest investigation,” he wrote in a letter to Lytton Strachey in 1928. “With regard to the people of past times we are in the same position as with dreams to which we have been given no associations—and only a layman could expect us to interpret dreams such as those.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course, by the time he wrote this letter, Freud had already analyzed such people of past times as Leonardo da Vinci, Daniel Paul Schreber, and Christopher Haitzmann, not to mention the primal hordes. And his sense of his own amateurishness did not prevent him from publishing *Civilization and its Discontents* the very next year. The best works of historically minded psychoanalysis or psychoanalytically minded history share this “must go on—can’t go on—I’ll go on” sensibility. Here, again, I turn

to Joan Scott, whose emphasis on the “incommensurability of psychoanalysis and history” belongs to this tradition. For Scott, incommensurability is not an obstacle to interpretation, but an incitement to it. Psychoanalysis calls into question the concepts, categories, and narrative techniques that historians have tended to take for granted; Scott’s recent work on fantasy is a powerful example of how we might transform historical practice through critical self-reflexivity.<sup>12</sup>

That said, this book tries a somewhat different approach to renewing and reinvigorating psychohistory. I take it as a given that our encounters with paperwork and the people who handle it inevitably reactivate some of our earliest wishes, conflicts, and fantasies about maternal provision, paternal authority, sibling rivalry, or whichever other familial division of labor happened to be in place in our childhoods. I also take it as a given that these fantasies, or at least their unconscious determinants, are inaccessible to historians—which does not mean they are of no interest, only that this interest is bound to be disappointed. Far from being evidence of the incommensurability of psychoanalysis and history, however, this should be treated as an opportunity for them to commiserate, and, yes, commensurate. Recognition of the impossibility of direct, unmediated access to the unconscious is not something that separates the two disciplines, but something that unites them. Psychoanalysis may be a science of the unconscious, but it is a practice of the *preconscious*, that intermediary region in Freud’s topography of the mind where truly unconscious wishes, conflicts, and fantasies are bound up to more or less highly organized thoughts, feelings, and eventually—especially—words. To put it another way, the preconscious is where everything specific to the subject comes into contact with everything nonspecific to it. From *The Interpretation of Dreams* to *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud insisted on the importance of preconscious mediation to psychoanalytic theory and technique.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes explicitly, but for the most part implicitly, this book takes the preconscious—“that chattering by means of which

we articulate ourselves inside ourselves,” as Lacan puts it—as its privileged level of interpretation.<sup>14</sup> We cannot stop ourselves from chattering about paperwork. If we listen carefully enough, I believe we will find that this chatter makes sense, that is to say, it is explicable and is itself a form of explication. Responding to this chatter, Jean-Marie Roland, who served as minister of the interior during one of the most difficult periods of the French Revolution, complained that his critics “assume that I have a lot of power because I have a lot to do.”<sup>15</sup> The complaint is self-pitying, self-deluded, and profoundly insightful. Having a lot to do does not always mean having a lot of power, but having a lot of power always means having a lot to do, and in the modern era, at least, most of what it has to do is paperwork. The investigation of the psychic life of paperwork must be able to account for how this medium makes everyone, no matter how powerful they may be in reality, feel so powerless.

As should be clear by now, *The Demon of Writing* is not intended to overturn Weber, Tilly, Foucault, or any other “master narrative” of state formation. Nor will it substitute for smaller-scale or shorter-*durée* histories of the social, institutional, and technological aspects of paperwork (the introduction of the typewriter, the feminization of clerical labor . . .) or its genres (memoranda, petitions, government surveys, financial instruments, diplomatic correspondence, forensic records, identity documents . . .). Nor will it replace histories of information (collection, classification, visualization, overload . . .) or archivization (preservation, memorialization, destruction . . .). My hope, more modest, is that this book might take its place on a shelf alongside some of these studies.

Four chapters. In Chapter 1, I suggest that the French Revolution invented a new ethos of paperwork. In Chapter 2, I examine how paperwork worked for and against the national-security state in a time of war; this chapter also includes a first attempt at explaining paperwork’s mythopoetic potentials. Chapter 3

continues this inquiry into the material and psychic realities of paperwork by following the history of the word “bureaucracy” as it emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The final chapter turns to Marx, Freud, and Barthes to outline a theory of paperwork that is attentive to both praxis and parapraxis. I conclude with some very brief thoughts about paperwork’s future.

CHAPTER ONE

**The Disciplined State**

Edme-Etienne Morizot lost his job in the Ministry of Finance in September 1788. His supervisors told him that financial troubles were forcing cuts across the administration, including the Lottery Bureau, where he had been employed as a clerk for over a decade. They promised him a pension in recognition of his many years of service to the king and wished him well. He packed up his things and left.

It was all a lie. The monarchy was in plenty of trouble, but his job had not been eliminated—he had simply been replaced. Within days, somebody else was at his old desk, performing his old duties. Morizot angrily approached the controller-general of finances to appeal his termination. Upon being questioned, the supervisors confessed that yes, they had lied, but they had their reasons: Morizot was impossible to get along with. They had seized on the ministry's cost-cutting plan as a pretext to rid themselves of a troublesome employee. They reasoned that that was in fact the generous thing to do, since it entitled the clerk to a pension, which he might have lost if they had resorted to disciplinary action. The controller-general reported this back to Morizot, along with the suggestion that that he take up the matter with the director-general of finances, Jacques Necker, arguably the most powerful official in the kingdom. He turned down the clerk's request for a loan.

Out of work, out of money, out of sorts, Morizot decided to sue his former employer. But when he went to warn his supervisors, he was told that the controller-general had got it all wrong.

Sure they liked him—everyone did. They had fought to save his job. But in the end, they had been unable to protect him from enemies, powerful enemies, high up in the ministry. Indeed, the young man who replaced him was none other than the son-in-law of the king's aunt's chambermaid. Could that be a coincidence? Morizot's suspicions seemed to be confirmed when the committee set up to arbitrate the dispute dissolved after complaining that Morizot was harassing them. This, at least, was the official explanation. Morizot suspected that his enemies must have threatened them. He wrote letters to the families of the director-general, the controller-general, and various other well-placed members of the nobility—including the Princesse de Lamballe, whose mutilated corpse would later become a symbol of the Revolution's excesses—recounting his problems and asking that they exert some of their considerable influence on his behalf. He received polite responses, but no help.

As it happens, this was not the first time Morizot had suffered a setback. He had started off his professional life as a lawyer, making his way through the heavily regulated guild system to obtain the privilege of arguing cases in front of the Paris Parlement, the most powerful court in the nation. He had abandoned this path to join the Finance Ministry in 1776 under the patronage of de Clugny, the controller-general at the time, expecting a rapid rise through the ministry's ranks. But his patron's death after only six months in office had left him stranded as a lowly clerk ever since. To this humiliation was added the fact that after a period of inactivity, he had lost the right to argue cases, which he found out at the worst possible moment, having shown up at court one day to sue his brother-in-law over an inheritance. This led to a new round of litigation against the courts, which he also lost, despite having been defended by Ambroise Falconnet, one of the Old Regime's celebrity litigators.<sup>1</sup>

Still, his efforts were not completely wasted. The fight over his exclusion from the guild had taught him how to pursue his claims by appealing to the will of the king, the justice of the

courts, the opinion of the public, and the influence of the well-connected—those well-worn paths of power traversing the political culture of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> He knew his way around the reception rooms of the ministries, courts, and salons; he knew whom to ask for favors and how to ask for them. He had every reason, in other words, to expect that he would be able to recover his position in the Finance Ministry from the son-in-law of the king's aunt's chambermaid. He failed miserably.

The story of this failure is the story of the French Revolution's success. It is the story of a transformation in the culture of paperwork, a transformation that would have permanent consequences for modernity. This chapter sets out to follow what I have come to believe is the most important feature of this transformation, the emergence of a radical new ethics of paperwork, one designed to sustain a state whose legitimacy was founded on the claim to represent, at every moment, every member of the nation. This ethics found its most direct expression in Article 15 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789, which established historically unprecedented guarantees of political and administrative accountability. Henceforward, every action or transaction undertaken by any person with or on behalf of the state would have to be documented in anticipation of an eventual public accounting. The disciplinary state, which relied on documents and details to keep track of its subjects, would also have to be a disciplined state, aware that those same documents and details could be used to keep track of it. For Morizot, and no doubt for many others, the sensation must have been uncanny, disorienting, terrifying. The facades of government buildings, the faces of the men who worked in them, even the documents they worked with looked very much the same as they had only months earlier. Yet they were no longer quite themselves.

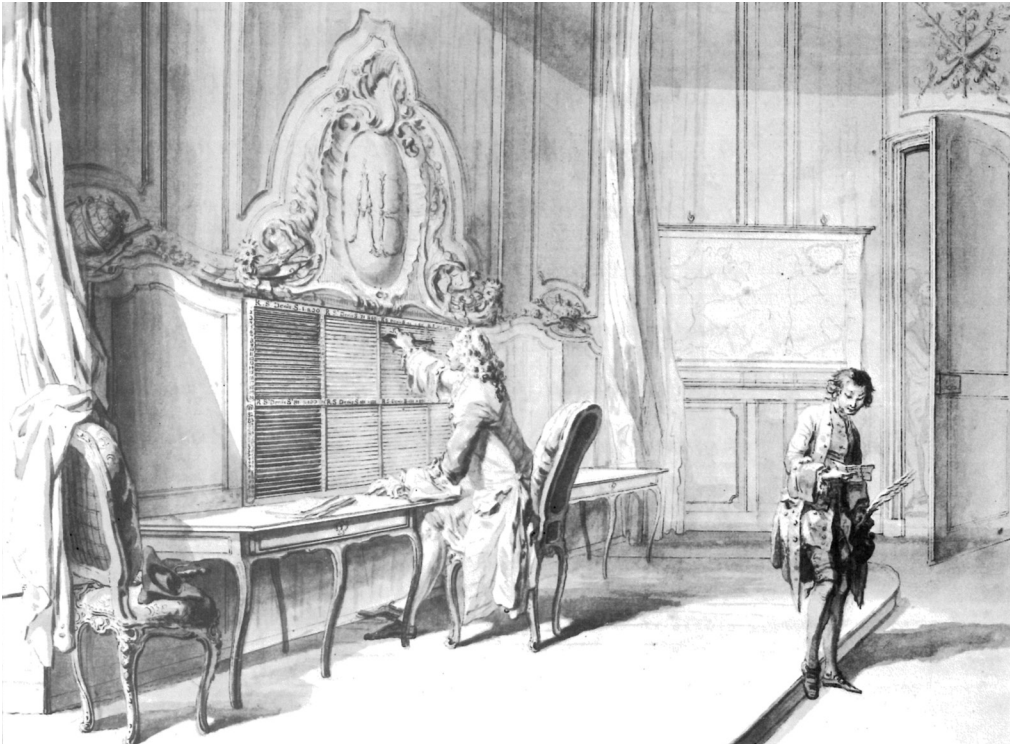
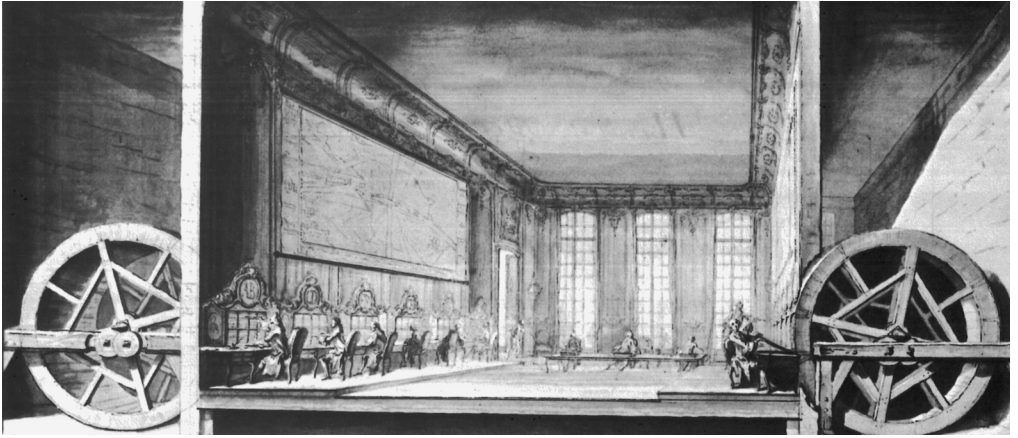
***“The National Assembly Doesn't Give a Damn”***

Walter Benjamin tells us that certain images capture the “dialectic at a standstill”;<sup>3</sup> this is surely the case for a series of ink

drawings contributed by the great illustrator Gabriel de Saint-Aubin to a 1749 manuscript on police reform. Written by a restless gendarme named Guillaute, the treatise presented a proposal for a comprehensive system of urban surveillance that would use preprinted forms to register the name, age, address, birthplace, travels, employment history, rent due, and tax status of every resident and visitor in the city. Alert to the technical obstacles to managing so much paperwork, he also proposed a machine for storing and retrieving these forms in a rapid, reliable, and efficient manner: vertical wheels twelve feet in diameter would rotate to reveal horizontal shelves full of files (figures 1 and 2). The clerks would access these storage devices from wall terminals, controlling them with foot pedals. Each one would be able to hold more than one hundred thousand of Guillaute's forms.<sup>4</sup>

One of many paperwork technologies dreamed up in the eighteenth century, Guillaute's invention looked backward to Agostino Ramelli's humanist book wheel (figure 3) and still more strikingly forward to the information-storage systems employed by East Germany's state security services.<sup>5</sup> Saint-Aubin seems to have worked hard to integrate this posthumanist, protoindustrial paperwork machine into an idealized rococo office environment. He added Bourbon flourishes above the terminals and organic embellishments along the chair frames—standard features of what Leora Auslander, in her study of French furniture, labels absolutism's "courtly stylistic regime."<sup>6</sup> What makes Saint-Aubin's images so revealing, however, is not their success, either as art or as technical illustration, but their failure. The disruptive potential of the new mechanisms is not quite contained by the aristocratic social relations that Saint-Aubin so carefully encoded in the office's bright, airy aesthetic. The heavy wheels appear to be on the verge of crushing the fragile space and the order that it represents. Saint-Aubin shows us absolutism and its agents caught in the contradiction between the forces and relations of state-sponsored document production, reproduction, and exchange.





Figures 1–2. The paperwork machine from Guillaute's *Mémoire sur la réformation de la police de France* (1749).

(CONTINUED...)

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